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Support by the United Nations system of the efforts of Governments to promote and consolidate new or restored democracies

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Report of the Secretary-General*

I. Introduction

1. Since the inclusion of this item in its agenda pursuant to its resolution 49/30 of 7 December 1994, the General Assembly has considered reports of the Secretary-General on the support provided by the United Nations system to the efforts of Governments to promote and consolidate new or restored democracies. By its resolutions 50/133 of 20 December 1995, 51/31 of 6 December 1996, 52/18 of 21 November 1997, 53/31 of 23 November 1998, 54/36 of 29 November 1999 and 55/43 of 27 November 2000, the Assembly commended the Secretary-General, and through him the United Nations system, for the activities undertaken at the request of Governments to support efforts to promote and consolidate new or restored democracies. It also encouraged the Secretary-General to continue to improve the capacity of the Organization to respond effectively to the requests of Member States through coherent and adequate support of their efforts to promote good governance and democratization.

2. The present report, submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 55/43, reviews the proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on New or Restored Democracies held at Cotonou, in December 2000, and the Declaration on Peace, Security, Democracy and Development adopted at the Conference. It also describes recent follow-up activities related to international conferences of new or restored democracies. Finally, it offers perspectives and suggestions for the United Nations in the promotion and consolidation of democratic development throughout the world.

II. Fourth International Conference of New or Restored Democracies

A. Main themes of the Conference

3. In its resolution 54/36, the General Assembly invited the Secretary-General, Member States, the relevant specialized agencies and bodies of the United Nations system, as well as other intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations to continue to contribute actively to the follow-up process of the Third International Conference of New or Restored Democracies. The Fourth International Conference of New or Restored Democracies was held at Cotonou,

* The footnote requested by the General Assembly in resolution 54/248 was not included in the submission.

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from 4 to 6 December 2000, the first time in Africa. The Government of Benin organized and hosted the Conference with the assistance of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Secretariat. The Conference adopted the Cotonou Declaration, on peace, security, democracy and development, together with its final report (see A/55/889, annex). The proceedings of the Conference will be published by UNDP towards the end of 2001.

4. For the first time, all Member States were invited to attend the Conference; 111 governmental delegations from Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America participated, as did representatives of 20 international organizations and bodies. In addition representatives of 51 non-governmental organizations attended the Conference as observers. The Conference was the largest demonstration to date of the widening global trend to strengthen and promote the democratization process in all regions of the world.

5. The Conference held a general debate on national experiences in democracy, peace, security and development. It also held parallel thematic debates on democracy, good governance and development; participation of youth and women in the process of democratization and development; and democracy and the prevention, management and settlement of conflicts.

6. Most of the statements made at the Conference can be grouped around the following four major issues:

(a) What are the best practices for the strengthening of democracy?

(b) How can conflicts be prevented, managed and settled in ways that would preserve democracy?

(c) How can the participation of youth and women in the process of democratization be maximized?

(d) What are the obstacles to the consolidation of democracy?

Best practice in strengthening democracy

7. A broad consensus emerged that, despite the universality of democratic norms and principles, there is no single model of democracy for all countries of the world. Each country must choose its own route to democracy and its own pace for the consolidation of democracy. At the same time, many delegates stressed that democracy was inconceivable without human rights and, in particular, the rights of women, children and minorities, and that it requires the gradual expansion of political space in order to guarantee the full exercise of the political, economic, social and cultural rights of all.

8. Many also emphasized that democracy and the rule of law were inextricably linked. It was also emphasized that, in order to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals and groups, an effective constitutional and legal framework was required. Another recurring theme was that economic development cannot be achieved without the rule of law and transparency in the management of public affairs.

Democratization and conflict prevention

9. Many participants stressed that the process of building a democracy that is rooted in a culture of tolerance and respect for diversity was a crucial element in strengthening the capacity of a State to prevent, manage and settle conflicts by peaceful means, given that social exclusion, intolerance and unequal access to vital resources were often at the root of today's armed conflicts. A number of delegations stressed that the best way to combat economic and social insecurity, and thus prevent political leaders from exploiting such insecurity to fan conflicts of identity, was to improve education and give greater responsibility to those most affected by it. It was also emphasized that peace was an essential prerequisite for democracy insofar as it allowed communities to use available resources and infrastructure to improve their quality of life, instead of destroying it through ethnic or religious violence. A discussion on the applicability of democratic principles to the prevention and management of conflicts was held at one of the thematic meetings of the Conference.

Participation of young people and women

10. The participation of young people and women in the process of democratization was another major theme of the Conference, with an entire thematic meeting devoted to the question. Statements on the challenge faced by women and young people in many new or restored democracies were made in connection with the need to provide them with more educational and employment opportunities and to protect them from the consequences of war, social dislocation and

disease. It was noted that, in some parts of the world and in Africa in particular, many young people did not attend school and had no gainful employment and therefore constituted a vulnerable target group for recruitment into the armed bands of warlords and political extremists. The consolidation of democracy required greater efforts to offer them hope in the future by providing them with opportunities for education and employment.

Obstacles to the consolidation of democracy

11. With regard to the obstacles to the consolidation of democracy, participants frequently mentioned poverty and its causes, which are rooted in local, national and international economic and social structures. Local structures that create and perpetuate poverty included unequal access to vital resources, such as land, and the lack of other types of productive capital. As regards national structures, mention was made of the absence of, or at times restrictions on democratic rights, without which ordinary citizens lack any say in decisions concerning the distribution of resources and the allocation of funds needed for development projects. With respect to international structures, the inequity of the markets in goods and capital, and in particular the burden of foreign debt, were often mentioned as obstacles. The solutions proposed to respond to these challenges include decentralization as a means of governance that permits local communities to take responsibility for their own affairs at the national level and external debt relief at the international level.

B. Cotonou Declaration

12. The Cotonou Declaration, which was adopted at the end of the Conference, covers a broad range of issues, including peace, security and disarmament; democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms; and development, poverty eradication and environment. It also contains a large number of recommendations addressed to organizations of civil society, the private sector, donor countries and the international community, the United Nations system and the follow-up mechanism first established at the Third Conference of New or Restored Democracies, held at Bucharest in 1997.

13. In the Declaration, ministers and representatives of new or restored democracies reaffirmed that the power of public authorities must be based on the will of the people, expressed freely in periodic, fair, pluralistic elections, free of intimidation, conducted by universal, equal suffrage and secret balloting and under the supervision of an independent institution, and that public authorities must be accountable for their acts.

14. Also, they vigorously condemned all military coups d'état, all forms of terrorism and violence against democratic, freely elected Governments, all undemocratic means of gaining, wielding and staying in power and all unconstitutional changes of government, and urges the continuation and expansion of activities carried out by the United Nations system, other intergovernmental organizations, Member States and non-governmental organizations to promote and consolidate democracy.

15. Further, they recognized development and poverty eradication as a means of promoting and preserving democratic development. In realizing the new vulnerability of democracy, they vigorously condemned all forms of international terrorism and pledged to take, individually and collectively, such measures as may be appropriate under international law to prevent and combat terrorism and international crime.

16. The Cotonou Declaration thus represents a comprehensive framework for promoting democratic principles and practices throughout the world. It is an important recent addition to the increasing body of resolutions, declarations and other international political and legal materials arising from the Declaration adopted at the First Conference of New or Restored Democracies, held at Manila in 1988.

17. International standards, resolutions or other documents that precede the Cotonou Declaration include the Managua Declaration of July 1994 (A/49/713, annex I); the document entitled "Progress Review and Recommendations", adopted at Bucharest in 1997 (A/52/334, appendix); the Universal Declaration of Democracy adopted by the Council of the Inter-Parliamentary Union in September 1997 (A/52/437, annex IV); decisions 141 (XXXV) and 142 (XXXV) adopted by the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity in July 1999 (see A/54/424, annex II); the Warsaw Declaration adopted at the Community of Democracies Ministerial Meeting in June 2000; the Bamako Declaration of the International Organization of la

Francophonie on the status of democratic practices, rights and freedoms in the francophone world of 3 November 2000; General Assembly resolution 55/96 of 4 December 2000, on promoting and consolidating democracy; Commission on Human Rights resolution 2001/41 of 23 April 2001, entitled "Continuing dialogue on measures to promote and consolidate democracy";[1] and the Inter-American Democratic Charter adopted by the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States at its meeting held at Lima, on 6 September 2001.

18. The Cotonou Declaration, together with the above-mentioned and other international political or legal instruments and statements, has created new momentum for broadened and strengthened international efforts to promote and consolidate democracy. The United Nations stands ready to work with new or restored democracies in the months and years to come towards the realization of the aspirations, goals and recommendations set forth in the Cotonou Declaration. In striving for the attainment of its goals, the United Nations plans to explore, among other things, how the above-mentioned international instruments and other documents have already contributed to the realization of democratic principles and practices from the point of view of international law.

Follow-up mechanism

19. In order to achieve the goals set forth in the Cotonou Declaration, the ministers and representatives of new or restored democracies called upon the Secretary-General to designate a focal point in the United Nations system to support the efforts of Member States to consolidate democracy, and to provide assistance to the follow-up mechanism to the Fourth International Conference of New or Restored Democracies. The Declaration also defines the role of the follow-up mechanism, originally established at the Third Conference, stating that it should be responsible for providing assistance to new or restored democracies, at their request, in the following areas:

(a) Drawing up a list of objectives for democratization programmes and a timetable indicating possible benchmarks for assessing their implementation;

(b) Drawing up a concise list of indicators which are acceptable and useful to the participating States;

(c) Identifying programmes and enabling new or restored democracies to participate in United Nations programmes that deal with issues relating to democratization and good governance;

(d) Promoting and strengthening regional and subregional structures for democratization programmes;

(e) Identifying the preconditions for attracting investment to encourage democratization efforts;

(f) Identifying and carrying out programmes that focus on the human person instead of focusing exclusively on institutions.

III. Recent follow-up activities related to international conferences of new or restored democracies

20. In the follow-up process to the Fourth Conference of New or Restored Democracies, the Government of Benin, after extensive consultations, convened the first meeting of the follow-up mechanism, as provided for in the Cotonou Declaration, on 20 September 2001. Participants stressed that this mechanism should operate in a flexible manner so as to achieve its objectives in an effective fashion. Future meetings will be scheduled to work out a comprehensive blueprint to implement the provisions of the Cotonou Declaration.

21. Two countries have offered to host the Fifth International Conference of New or Restored Democracies. Participants at the Fourth Conference agreed that the follow-up mechanism provided for in the Cotonou Declaration should undertake consultations with these countries to determine the venue of the Fifth Conference.

22. The United Nations has continued to sponsor regional seminars on democratization. One recent example is the seminar on democratization and conflict prevention in South-East Asia in the twenty-first century, which was held at Bangkok in January 2001. This seminar was jointly organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, UNDP, the Department of Political Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat and

the Institute of Security and International Studies at Chulalongkorn University.

23. In accordance with General Assembly resolution 55/285 of 7 September 2001, the discussion on the agenda item entitled "Support by the United Nations system of the efforts of Governments to promote and consolidate new or restored democracies" will be considered on a biennial basis, starting at the fifty-sixth session and, accordingly, the next report on new or restored democracies will be submitted to the fifty-eighth session of the Assembly. That report will contain an updated inventory of activities carried out by the United Nations system in democratization and governance.

24. Following the second such inventory contained in my 1998 report on new or restored democracies (A/53/554 and Corr.1), I recommended in my 1999 report that the inventory be conducted every third or fourth year, or in years preceding the holding of future conferences of new or restored democracies (A/54/492, para. 35). The General Assembly, in resolution 54/36, endorsed the recommendations contained in that report. As a first step towards updating the inventory of activities of the United Nations system to promote democratization, all departments, offices, funds and programmes will be informed of the contents of the Cotonou Declaration and asked to reflect on the activities within their mandates that may contribute to the attainment of its principles and recommendations. The results of this inventory will be useful for the follow-up mechanism to the Fourth International Conference and in the preparations for the Fifth Conference.

IV. Observations

25. Among the most remarkable achievements of the 1990s has been the near doubling of the number of democracies across the globe. The United Nations has played an important role in supporting this trend through its multifaceted programmes and activities.

26. Support for democratization processes must be based on the clear understanding that there can be no single prescribed form of democracy. To be sustainable, the democratic order of a State must be authentic and reflect the culture, history and political experience of its citizens. Democracy must be seen as a process that requires much more than the conduct of elections. While recognizing the importance for democracy of periodic free and fair elections, a democratic system should also provide opportunities for people to participate fully in all aspects of society. Viewed from this perspective, another essential element of democracy is the rule of law. Democracy must encompass those principles, rules, institutions and procedures that ensure representation and accountability and protect the individual or groups against arbitrary behaviour, injustice or oppression by the State or other actors.

27. In my view, the benchmark for a sustainable democracy is the extent to which a State acts in accordance with universal and indivisible human rights: the civil and political rights, as well as the economic, social and cultural rights defined in international human rights law. I therefore consider the status of human rights to be an important barometer of a healthy democracy. The current state of international human rights law clearly shows that democracy is not only a universally recognized ideal and a goal, but also a fundamental right of citizens.

28. Democracy should also be considered as being intrinsically linked to sustainable development. Democratization is aimed at enlarging people's choices and therefore contributes to poverty eradication and development. States which respect the rights of all their citizens, and in which their citizens have a say in decisions that affect their lives, are also more likely to benefit from the creative energies of their citizens, and to provide the kind of economic and social environment that is conducive to economic development.

29. The growing international trend to condemn unconstitutional removals of Governments or attempts at outright subversion of democracy is a welcome development. The Cotonou Declaration has expanded the scope of such condemnation to new levels. At the Assembly of Heads of State and Government held at Algiers from 12 to 14 July 1999, the Organization of African Unity had decided no longer to admit to its summit meetings leaders who had come to power by unconstitutional means, a decision which the organization has applied at subsequent summit meetings. Similarly, in the Warsaw Declaration adopted in June 2000, the Community of Democracies resolved jointly to cooperate so as to discourage and resist the threat to democracy posed by the overthrow of constitutionally elected Governments.

30. In October 2000, the Inter-Parliamentary Union adopted a resolution on the prevention of military and other coups against democratically elected Governments and against the free will of the peoples expressed through direct suffrage and action to address grave violations of the human rights of parliamentarians. In that resolution, the Union recognized that one of the essential means of preventing threats to democracy was to ensure the full participation of all sectors of society, including women, minorities and vulnerable groups, in democratic processes.

31. At the root of many armed conflicts is the issue of the State and its power, that is, who controls it and how it is used. It is for this reason that the promotion of democratic governance should also be considered as one of the most promising long-term strategies for the prevention of armed conflict, an issue which received special attention at the Fourth Conference of New or Restored Democracies. As elaborated in my recent report on the prevention of armed conflict (A/55/985-S/2001/574 and Corr.1), to be effective a conflict prevention strategy needs to address the multidimensional root causes of conflict through a variety of political, legal, economic and other measures involving the many parts of the United Nations system and incorporating a regional dimension. Some of these activities are directly related to democratization and governance, such as enhancing support for democratic principles such as a fair role for the opposition, equitable access to public media, security sector reform, promoting tolerance and respect for human rights and providing technical assistance for the constitution on national institutions.

32. Experience shows that peace and security are essential preconditions for a healthy and vibrant democracy. When a society is at war, the prevalence of anarchy and destruction make every attempt at democracy elusive. On the other hand, a democratic culture is the best safeguard against war, destruction and terrorism, since it ensures that disputes are resolved in a peaceful and equitable fashion through institutions and procedures that are governed by the rule of law and the norms of universal human rights reflecting the will of the people. Experience shows that the more open and accountable that Governments are to all their citizens, the more likely it is that dialogue prevails over force.

33. The two aforementioned international forums, the Conference of New or Restored Democracies and the Community of Democracies which will have its second major conference at Seoul in 2002, play an important role in mobilizing the political will for advancing democratic values, principles and practices and ensuring that the lessons learned from democratization processes in various parts of the world will not be lost by future generations. Both movements might consider further practical steps for the continuation of the development of a complementary and mutually reinforcing process, with a view to promoting democratization throughout the world in an even more vigorous and concerted way in the future. The follow-up mechanism to the Fourth International Conference of New or Restored Democracies could play an important role in this connection.

34. An overwhelming majority of Member States have participated in the four conferences of new or restored democracies that have been held so far, as well as other recent forums on democracy, and have signed declarations or political statements pledging adherence to democratic principles and practices. The number of activities of Governments, the United Nations system and non-governmental organizations to assist democratization processes has also dramatically increased.

35. The global conferences, assistance programmes and legal instruments should also be complemented by work at regional, national and local levels. The United Nations has promoted and supported regional seminars and workshops that have greatly enhanced knowledge of experiences in democratization in various parts of the world. A recent example is the seminar on democratization and conflict prevention in South-East Asia, which was held at Bangkok in January 2001. It is important to continue these efforts to exchange views and experiences at the regional and national levels. Member States should take up the challenge to explore more systematically lessons learned in the practice of democracy by comparing their experiences with neighbours and civil society alike, and to share the lessons learned with the international community. Regional organizations could also play an important catalytic role in this regard.

36. I stand ready to work together with new or restored democracies and all Member States to achieve the goals set forth in the Cotonou Declaration. This Declaration, together with recently adopted instruments

and statements, has broadened both the political will and scope for greater and stronger international efforts to promote and consolidate democracy in all parts of the world. This is a solid basis for continuing work in this area, which is steadily increasing in importance in a more interdependent and vulnerable world in which our democratic values are still constantly being challenged by undemocratic and violent acts.

Notes

[1] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2001, Supplement No. 3* (E/2001/23), chap. II, sect. A.